

# Wabash Reflections

July 2004

A newsletter brought to you by the Wabash River Heritage Corridor Commission (WRHCC). The Wabash River Heritage Corridor Commission, representing the Wabash River Heritage Corridor, shall protect and enhance the natural, cultural, historical, and recreational resources and encourage sustainable development of the corridor.

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## **Parkland Along The Wabash River Gets New Amenities**

*Submitted by Mike Mettler*

Late last year, the City of Huntington Park Board was informed by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources that its \$200,000 grant request from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund for new facilities at Evergreen Park, which is located along the Wabash River, was selected to be submitted to the National Park Service for final approval. Evergreen Park, which was recently given to the City by Huntington County, has had a long and varied history.

In 1876, on the parcel's original 181 acres, the County built what was initially a poor farm and the county infirmary before being changed to the County Home, a residential care facility. Constructed at a cost of \$17,000, the County Home was an impressive two-story Italianate structure designed by architect J.G. Johnson and listed as "outstanding" in the 1982 Indiana Historic Sites and Structures Inventory. The County Home, a tax supported facility was part of a state county home system that once boasted of a home in every Indiana County.

The County Commissioners closed the home in 1991 because of deterioration of the structure and the high costs of renovation. It was then sold at auction and experienced continued deterioration before finally being demolished in 1996. The site currently contains a new juvenile detention facility.

When, in 1998, the Huntington Municipal Airport needed land from the adjacent Roush Lake property to extend their runway a three-way exchange was conceived. The City airport bought 89 acres of the former County Home land and traded it to the IDNR for 31 acres of the Reservoir property.



Area where one of three shelters will be placed overlooking the Wabash River

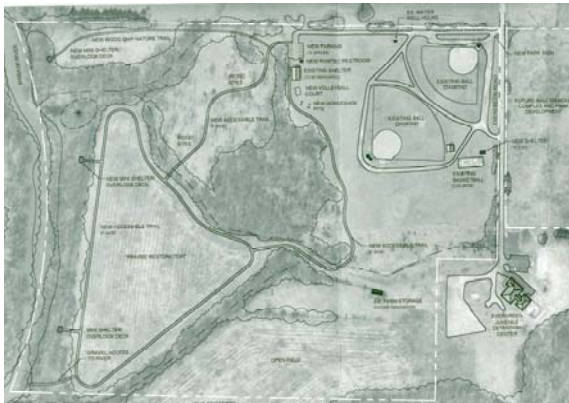


Artist rendition circa. 1879

The County's remaining 84 acres along the Wabash River has forests and farmland along with Evergreen Park, which contains two softball diamonds and a picnic shelter. Thirty acres were then leased to Huntington County Baseball, Inc. for construction of new baseball diamonds for their Little League program. In 2002, the Huntington City Park Department approached the County Commissioners interested in part of the land at Evergreen Park to possibly construct a BMX bike track. The County Commissioners

offered the entire 84 acres to the City, which also contains the Little League leased land, feeling that the City Park Board was in a better position to maintain it.

The City's LWCF grant project at Evergreen Park will develop a looping one-mile long, eight-foot wide, paved accessible trail. This trail will pass along the Wabash River, mature forests, and wildflowers. At two places along the trail, small mini-shelters with decks will overlook the river. Also, a shorter, limited access, one-fifth of a mile nature trail will branch off ending at the river with one more shelter overlook. Another trail branch will provide canoe access to the river. Within the looping trail, 8 acres of fallow farm ground will be planted with Midwest prairie plants.



Project site plan as designed by SiteScapes, Inc.

Besides the river overlook shelters, other facilities included in this project include a new picnic shelter, renovation of an existing shelter, park benches and tables, a restroom facility, improvements to the entry road and parking lot, and new entrance signage.

In addition to the hiking trails, other recreational opportunities to be developed with this plan include new playground equipment, volleyball court, and horseshoe pit near the picnic area.

Evergreen Park, the City of Huntington's newest and largest park, will provide its citizens recreational opportunities that the City's other parks located in urban neighborhoods cannot. "It gives us an area where we can do some things we don't do in our current parks," says Curt

Cooley, Huntington Parks Superintendent. This property will make available a place for exercise, natural and environmental education, and access to one of Indiana's treasures, the Wabash River.

## **"De-trash the Wabash"** A clean up effort

Banks of the Wabash has unveiled a plan to host a clean up effort along the Wabash River on August 28th, 2004. The clean-up registration will be at Fort Ouiatenon from 8:30 – 9:00 am. Clean-up efforts take place from 9:00 am until noon. Refreshments and a celebration event will follow at Fort Ouiatenon. Co-sponsors for the event include Wabash River Heritage Corridor Commission, Hoosier Environmental Council, Wabash Riverkeepers, Wabash Parkway Commission, Tippecanoe Soil and Water Conservation District, Indiana Department of Natural Resources-Division of Outdoor Recreation, Tippecanoe County Parks and Recreation, West Lafayette Parks and Recreation, and Lafayette Parks and Recreation. Eli Lilly is also participating in the event.

The scope of the one day clean up is from Tecumseh Park downstream to Fort Ouiatenon. Volunteers will be able to choose the location where they would like to clean. If volunteers bring their own watercraft, support will be available to clear trash from on the water. A flotilla of watercrafts will launch from Shamrock Park in Lafayette and float downstream collecting trash to deposit at Fort Ouiatenon. Less

experienced boaters can help clean up the island across from Shamrock Park. Dumpsters donated by Waste Management will be at Fort Ouiatenon and Shamrock Park to collect all the trash. Tire Barn and Mr. & Mrs. Tire have also agreed to accept tires collected during the clean up effort.

After the clean up volunteers are invited to come back to Fort Ouiatenon for refreshments, Papa Johns and Best Distributors, a distributor of Jay's Potato Chips, have donated food and Coca-Cola and Tippecanoe County Soil and Water Conservation District have donated bottled water.

The County Commissioners KD Benson, Ruth Shedd and John Knochel, State Representative Sheila Klinker, Mayor Jan Mills have written letters of support for the De-trash the Wabash clean up and Mayor Tony Roswarski has provided verbal support.

Sycamore Chapter of the Audubon Society, Wal-Mart and Wabash National have made financial contributions to the clean up effort. Your financial support for this clean-up effort would be greatly appreciated. Checks can be sent to Banks of the Wabash, Inc. P.O. Box 1253, Lafayette IN 47902-1253. Supplies such as garbage bags (30 gallon) and leather gloves are also being accepted. For more information about the clean-up or to register as a volunteer contact Susan Benner at 765-427-1505.

### **Wabash River 101**

The Wabash River Heritage Corridor Commission (WRHCC) is once again holding a **"Teach the Wabash River"** Symposium. Last year's event in Huntington County was a success and identified a desire among teachers and youth organizers for more Wabash River information. This year's event will be taking place August 3, 2004 at Ouabache (Wabash) Trails Park's Nature Center in Vincennes. The purpose of bringing together an audience of K-12 teachers, home school instructors, Boy and Girl Scouts, and 4-H leaders is to get them enthused about incorporating the Wabash River into their curriculum or service projects.

Speakers at the event will provide participants some of the tools necessary to introduce the Wabash River into discussions and lessons about environmental science and Indiana History and Culture. **"Teach the Wabash River"** will take place from 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. and is a FREE event. Questions and registration information may be directed to Susan Benner, Executive Director of the Wabash River Heritage Corridor Commission at 765-427-1505 or by e-mail at [sbenner@wrhcc.in.gov](mailto:sbenner@wrhcc.in.gov).

### **Wayne Couch Interview About The Wabash River**

**By Robert Y. Spence**

Wayne Couch of Owensville – who recently celebrated his 94th birthday – has been described as a human encyclopedia about the Wabash River area of Gibson County. He was born near the river on May 31, 1910, the son of George and Elsie Couch. As he has lived his years, he has learned a vast amount about his area, about everything from transportation on the river to the experiences of his neighbors to the everyday concerns that make life what it is.

His tales can begin 64 years ago when he bought a cabin on the river near Mt. Carmel to use it as a place to go fishing. But his tales also range as far back in time as 1875 and forward to today's interest to make folks more aware of the rich history of that section. In 1942 there was still interest in developing the oil fields around Griffin, a concern that began in the late 1930's. Two men, one named Hugh Coats and the other named "Titanic" Thomas, owned the cabin. They had won the property in a game of poker and used the cabin as a place to stay while they were active in oil exploration. The pair sold the cabin to Crouch who went there often in the '40's and continued collecting his tales of the river. "There was shell oil on the river then, but no one ever drilled all around for it," Couch said. Oil and the gamblers who became interested in it, amount to only one of the stories that Couch tells.

Another one, however, that is completely fascinating, is the tale of the "Red Bridge," the covered bridge near Johnson and Griffin. "In 1875," Couch said, "there was a disastrous flood in the month of August, about the only summertime flood on the river. "People called it the 'August Fresh.' It ran all the animals out of the hills. The water then was 28 feet deep, which was ten feet above the flood stage." In the aftermath of that flood, folks became interested in bridging the river to make it easier to cross the Wabash in the future. The bridge built then is 176 feet long. It cost \$3,400 to build it. A man named Polk was the surveyor of Gibson County then. He received \$100 for his work locating the bridge. Another man,

the contractor, received another \$100 for his effort. Remaining money went into the materials for the bridge.

Eventually, the support system of the bridge included concrete piers, which were built under the bridge about the year 1900. "Those piers would support any weight," Couch said. "But loads got so heavy that the timbers on the road would crack under the pressure." Yet traffic on the road through the bridge is only part of the most interesting history of work along the Wabash. "This whole area was timbered," Couch said. "There were log rafts on the river for years and small steamboats moved everything you can imagine up and down the river."

That's little wonder. The 1880 Census report showed there were more than 500 people living in communities in that area. By the time the 1900 census was taken, the population had swelled. Many farm products were shipped on the Wabash then. "We had salt beef, salt pork, grains, and all types of produce moving through here," Couch said. "You see, a keel boat or a log raft only needs three feet of water. That's one reason why so much was easy to transport that way. "Everything went to markets as far away as Natchez, Vicksburg, and New Orleans.

"Often the men who took those things to those markets walked back this way over the Natchez Trace." Wednesday, when Couch shared many of his memories, there was not a chance to talk more about the Natchez Trace, which makes one of America's most absorbing histories. That timeless highway was the road that Americans took to Texas in the years the later state was governed by Mexico.

Another story that Couch tells expertly is the story of the dam at Mt. Carmel. That tale began in 1895, when the U.S. Government chose to improve the navigation of the Wabash. The Army corps of Engineers built the 42-foot dam after two contractors had gone broke in the effort. When the dam was finished, though, things began changing on the Wabash. The railroad era in that section had begun. "In 1878," Couch said, "the first railroad after the Civil War was built through here." Work on that line continued in 1879. Then by 1910, when the last railroad was built here, much of the river traffic ended.

The last commercial steamboat that operated on the Wabash, he said, was the "Dorcas." It was a gasoline-powered boat kept by the Bowling Green Warehouse. Eventually it was abandoned and left to rust away. "The boats on the river since then have all been excursion-type boats." His tales go on and on about the area – every one in succession as interesting or more interesting than the previous tale. He told of a saloon that once stood beside the river. It was started in 1908 and remained in business until prohibition closed it just before 1920. It is like the tale of the Bingham distillery that once was operated in Patoka. Couch's obvious regard for his place in the world continues to today's concerns as well. "I would like to see more effort spent collecting the history of the river area south of Vincennes," he said. "Maybe this talk will encourage people with money to spend doing that work to pay more attention to this place."